

Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu, *Washington Post*

Dhaki is from the southern region of Ethiopia. At age 13, instead of going to school, Dhaki was married and tended cattle for her family. Her husband, 11 years older than she, regularly forced himself on her. Her nightly cries were ignored by her neighbors, and she was shunned by her community for not respecting the wishes of her husband.

Sadly, millions of girls worldwide have little or no choice about when and whom they marry. One in three girls in the developing world is married before she is 18 - one in seven before she is 15. The reasons for child marriage vary: Custom, poverty and lack of education all play a part. Boys are married young, too, but a far greater number of girls are affected and it has a much more devastating impact on their lives.

Because they are young, child brides are relatively powerless in their families and often lack access to health information. This makes them more vulnerable to serious injury and death in childbirth - the leading cause of death in girls in the developing world ages 15 to 19. Child brides are also more likely to experience domestic violence and to live in poverty than women who marry later.

Child marriage is just one factor in the lives of many girls and women, but it affects not just their health, education and employment options but also the welfare of their communities. We know that empowering girls is one of the most effective ways to improve the health and prosperity of societies. Child marriage perpetuates poverty by keeping girls, their children and their communities poor.

To realize change, we first need to provide greater options for girls by investing in them and supporting their families. Changing national laws is not enough. Most countries with high rates of child marriage have outlawed it. Lasting change requires local leaders and communities to agree that child marriage is harmful and make a collective decision to end the practice.

Innovative grass-roots programs to end child marriage already exist. From Cameroon to India, communities, humanitarian aid organizations and women's rights groups are pioneering efforts to encourage investment in girls and discourage child marriage. As a starting point, they are fostering community conversations about the health risks for very young mothers and the benefits of education. Over time, communities are beginning to question traditional practices and ask what can be done to improve the lives of their daughters.

This change, however, is taking place on a small scale, very slowly. We can all play our part in encouraging change on a larger scale. The United States is stepping up: The *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act*, legislation that has bipartisan support, was passed unanimously by the Senate last week. This act illustrates how support for securing a just and healthy life for every woman and girl transcends politics.

As members of an independent group of leaders who were asked by Nelson Mandela to use our influence to address major causes of human suffering, we have never been involved in supporting a specific piece of legislation before, but we believe that investing in efforts to prevent child marriage is critical to global development and the achievement of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals. We applaud the Senate for passing this forward-looking legislation and urge the House of Representatives to follow suit.

We know that these efforts can have real impact. We are pleased to report that Dhaki received support from a local development program that enabled her to leave her husband and continue her education. She now teaches others about the risks of early marriage and the benefits of going to school. The United States has the opportunity to help millions of girls like Dhaki realize a different future for themselves and their daughters, and in the process, transform entire communities worldwide.

*Mary Robinson is a former president of Ireland. Desmond Tutu, the recipient of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, is archbishop emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa. Both are members of The Elders, a group of global leaders focusing on conflict and humanitarian issues.*